

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## NJAS Celebrates the International Year of Indigenous Languages

Crane, Thera Marie

2019-07-09

---

Crane , T M & Schneidermann , N 2019 , ' NJAS Celebrates the International Year of Indigenous Languages ' , Nordic Journal of African Studies , vol. 28 , no. 1 .

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/308564>

---

cc\_by\_nc  
publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# NJAS Celebrates the International Year of Indigenous Languages

*Thera Marie Crane*  
*Subject Editor, Language Studies*

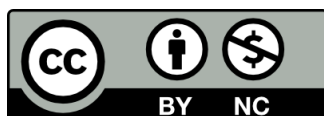
*Nanna Schneidermann*  
*Subject Editor, Social Studies*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared 2019 the “International Year of Indigenous Languages”. Indigenous languages are infused with millennia of intergenerationally transmitted cultural and scientific knowledge. They are therefore key to understanding not only the deep history of their speakers, but also the environments in which they are spoken and the best ways to live sustainably therein. UNESCO states that indigenous languages “should be recognized as a strategic national resource for development, peace building and reconciliation” (<https://en.iyil2019.org/about/>).

Africa is the most linguistically diverse continent on earth. While languages are notoriously difficult to count, the Ethnologue, a catalog of the world’s languages, lists “7111 known living languages” (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2019). Of these, 2140 are spoken in Africa – and most of those 2140 are also indigenous to Africa. That is, although Africa is home to only about one-sixth of the world’s population, almost one-third of known languages are African in origin. Studies of African languages and linguistics are invaluable to our understanding not only of human language, but also of history, culture, and science (see Hyman, 2003; Childs, 2003:1–18 for some examples).

Like other indigenous languages of the world, many African languages are in a precarious position: of the 2140 languages listed in the Ethnologue, 366 are described as “in trouble” and 135 as “dying”. These figures mean that almost one-quarter of African languages are in danger of becoming extinct. An additional 909 languages are labeled “vigorous”, meaning that they are still being transmitted orally from parents to children, but there is no written tradition (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2019; Lewis & Simons, 2010). Many of these languages have little to no linguistic description or documentation. UNESCO’s goal of supporting “the sharing and enhancement of information, research and understanding about indigenous languages” (UNESCO, 2019:10) is therefore of great relevance for African Studies.

Research in African languages reveals cultural and scientific riches in a vast diversity of subjects, as evidenced by the language-focused articles in this issue of NJAS.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

**Yetebarek** describes the long and complex traditions of indigenous Gofa naming practices in Ethiopia and their interactions with the events of Ethiopian political history. Yetebarek illustrates the difficulties of maintaining naming traditions against governmental and cultural influences when these are not favorable to indigenous practices.

**Asante** gives a detailed description and analysis of focus constructions in Nkami, an endangered Southern Guang (Guang, Kwa) language of Ghana spoken by only about 400 people. Asante situates the Nkami constructions within the broader Kwa perspective, showing small but significant cross-linguistic distinctions that are important for the typological understanding of focus. The paper shows the scientific value of devoting research resources to minority indigenous languages, even if related languages are already documented.

**Vydrin and Roberts** report the results of reading experiments with an orthography of Eastern Dan, a South Mande language spoken by around 650,000 people in Côte d'Ivoire (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2019). Vydrin and Roberts suggest linguistic and non-linguistic factors that may contribute to tonal oral reading errors by speakers of Eastern Dan. Understanding these factors may be of importance in developing and disseminating orthographies of other indigenous languages of Africa (and beyond) which share characteristics of Eastern Dan, such as significant dialect diversity, a heavy functional load of tone, or the lack of widespread access to written materials in the language.

This issue's non-linguistic contribution relates to the political languages of conflict resolution in Liberia. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, **Käihkö** examines the ambiguous relationship between the state and secret societies in peace building and conflict management. The article illustrates how claims to indigeneity and "tradition" are central to political authority in post-war Liberia, and warns that these can be instrumentalised to both solve and cause conflicts.

Since its inception in 1992, *The Nordic Journal of African Studies* has provided an international forum for original research articles on indigenous African languages, many of which are authored by native speakers of those languages. Our no-fee, open-access model means that scholars can escape the pay-to-publish trap, and that published papers are accessible to accomplished and aspiring African-language researchers regardless of the financial resources of their institutions. We are also committed to our rigorous blind review process, ensuring that the papers published are of high quality, and that all authors who submit papers receive valuable feedback on their work.

In the Nordic region, both Norway and Sweden are official governmental partners of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. We at the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* proudly endorse UNESCO's indigenous language goals and work to enhance the visibility of scholarship in African languages and linguistics, not only in 2019, but every year.

## REFERENCES

**Childs, George Tucker. 2003.**

*An introduction to African languages.* Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

**Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig, . 2019.**

*Ethnologue: Languages of the world. Twenty-second edition.* Dallas, Texas: SIL International.

**Hyman, Larry M. June 18, 2003.**

“Why describe African languages?” *World Congress of African Linguistics 4 / Annual Conference on African Linguistics 34.* Rutgers.

**Lewis, M. Paul, and Gary F. Simons. 2010.**

“Assessing endangerment: Expanding Fishman’s GIDS.” *Revue roumaine de linguistique*, 103–119.

**U.N. Economic and Social Council**, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Secretariat. 17<sup>th</sup> Session. “Action plan for organizing the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages : note / by the Secretariat” (E/C.19/2018/8). 21 February 2018.  
(<https://iyil.ph/pages/action-plan-2019-iyil/>)